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ABSTRACT

Journal entries of a secondary school teacher visiting Japan are presented in this document. Observations about entertainment, food, customs, prices of goods, and other aspects of Japanese culture are made. Discussion questions, an activity for 7th- to 12th-graders, and copies of several photographs also are included. (DB)

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THE COMPACT SOCIETY: JAPANESE CULTURE IN THE 1990'S

JOURNAL ENTRIES
ON THE 1990 KEZAI KOHO FELLOWSHIP
BY BILL TINKLER

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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October 4, 1990

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June 25, 7:35 PM, Arrival in Tokyo:

Outside the bus window Tokyo office buildings flanked each side of the double-decked highway in all directions, except for an occasional patch of land encased in a huge net. Inside this area people were hitting golf balls. At 6:30 PM the office buildings were still lit -- people seemed to work a bit later than office workers in America. I looked down at the canned soft drink I had purchased at the airport and smiled. Next to the Japanese calligraphy were the words "Georgia Coffee, Coca Cola company" -- a reminder of home in a faraway land. The drink cost 100 yen or about 68 cents.

As part of my fellowship in Japan I was staying at the Palace Hotel, courtesy of the Kai Don Ren organization and the Kazai Koho Center. Across the street was the Japanese emperor's imperial palace. Kai Don Ren is like all of the chambers of commerce and all the corporate boards in America put together. It had gone to great expense to help North American educators like myself learn more about modern Japanese culture. I was impressed.

After being introduced to our hosts, we were given a stack of materials and an envelope with 18,000 yen for meals when away from the hotels. The 18,000 yen added up to about $122.00. Seeing all this cash gave us the illusion that we were going to be able to supplement our meals with some really serious shopping. Indeed, some of this cash was used to buy yukatas (cotton kimonos for sleeping) and gifts for my children. However, we were quickly disappointed with how expensive many items were in Japan.

In one hotel gift shop, for example, I saw a small box of seedless green grapes selling for 3,000 yen (or about $20.00). Although the service and cuisine were terrific, breakfasts usually cost 1800 yen or a minimum of $12.00. In Tenmaya Department Store in Okayama a fairly simple cotton dress displayed a price tag of 49,000 yen or about $335.00 at the current exchange rate. Computers, compact disc players and other electronic hardware were much better deals (if you afford to buy them in the first place).

Tuesday, 6/26/90 Seminars on Japanese Culture

Mrs. A. Kuno (or Kuno-san) lectured about Japanese women in modern society. She said that there is increasing tension between traditional and modern values. "Dinks" (double income, no kids) are becoming more common in Japanese society, with about 50% of Japanese women working at least part-time outside the home. There still seems to be a question of how far a woman may advance in the leadership roles of Japanese businesses.

Arranged marriages are still popular among the young, but women can still say no if the suitor is not attractive to them. She said that Japanese women today have the best of both worlds because when they are young, they can have boyfriends without having to marry them. When older, however, they can employ the services of matchmakers to find and marry more prosperous men.

The main reason for divorce in Japan according to Kuno-san is that men are not faithful to their wives. Because they do not care to put up with such behavior anymore, more and more Japanese women are divorcing their husbands once the children are grown. Another big problem in Japanese society concerns who will take care of elderly parents. Because of the shortage of space, homes are

tremendously expensive, and it is not always possible to move in with one's grown children. This problem of how to deal with elderly parents exists in the U.S. as well.

9:45 PM Rapping in Roppongi

One evening a bunch of us went to check out the night life in Tokyo. At the first disco we were told that it was a private party, but then the doorman mentioned a figure of 5000 yen per person (about $34.00). By the time he had dropped it to 3000 yen we had already decided to leave. That cover charge seemed awfully high to us.

The second place wanted only couples, and since we had two more guys than girls, we were shut out there too. So, we walked on down the street and found a place where there were a lot of young people and "foreigners" hanging out around the elevator (all discos seemed to be on upper floors). When we went up to the fourth floor, a young man asked us for 3000 yen to be admitted to the disco. We finally decided to pay this exorbitant cover charge only to discover afterwards that it included drink "coupons".

One drink on the menu was a can of "Peachtree Fizz" with a southern plantation pictured on the front of the can. It said that it contained about 4% alcohol. I wasn't sure about these canned drinks, so I ordered orange juice instead. Beer was not covered by the coupons. It was easy enough to get anyway, since it was sold by the liter out of vending machines on street corners. (Sometimes I wondered how they kept children from buying this beer.) Anyway, the taped music at the disco was a loud, contemporary mix of western-style rock including both Japanese and western performers.

There were boys and girls on the dance floor who did not seem to be dancing with anyone in particular. The place looked as if it catered more to the teen set. There were flashing lights, fog machines and modern sound equipment. Ray Land, my Australian buddy on the trip, challenged me to find two Japanese dance partners within the next half hour. When I asked one young Japanese lady to dance, I ended up dancing with both her and her girlfriend. Talk about weird! These two would dance a while, look up at me and then giggle. Could it have been my dancing?

The name of one popular disco chain we visited sounded strange: "Maharaja, Sometime." It seemed to be another example of "Jenglish," where English words have been scrambled in signs and product advertisements. Other examples include the bag of "freshly caught oranges," the Asahi beer advertisement, (displaying a picture of Hank Aaron, no less) that reads, "Live Asahi for live people." Or how about "no smorking allowed" or the sign on the hotel hair dryer that sternly warned, "this hair dryer not to be used for the other purpose!"

Japanese young people seemed to dance in a more controlled, less flamboyant style at discos than Westerners. Then, again, maybe we were not typical Westerners. Japanese young people also seemed to memorize dance routines, giving the impression that they valued precision movement over creativity. I reflected on how our hosts had used the word "synthesize" to characterize how Japanese have borrowed ideas from other cultures and adapted them to suit their own values and needs.

Well, at least in one quick dance I had taken care of my Aussie friend's challenge. There would be other challenges ahead. At about 11:50 PM the Japanese teenagers seemed to be leaving, so we decided to go too. We managed to get back to the subway station, buy tickets and get on a train, only to find that we were headed out of the city and away from our hotel. Two trains later (with the help of a Californian who had come to Japan to teach English) we found our way back. Everyone in Tokyo relies on the subway to get around -- even elementary school children late at night would ride the subway unescorted.

6/30 HOMESTAY WITH THE MIYATA FAMILY IN OKAYAMA

Kikuko Miyata, a short matronly woman with a bright smile, was in the crowd of Japanese introduced to me at the reception for homestay families and KKC fellows. She spoke English well enough and seemed pleasant though a bit reserved at first. It was an awkward moment trying to pair us with families, take our picture and eat a meal. I was not really sure when or what we would eat at the host home, so I stuffed my face with shrimp and pork balls.

Mrs. Miyata drove Denny Schillings of Chicago and I to what she called a "party," hosted by the local community foreign language club. We were ushered to an upstairs room full of about 20 youngsters between the ages of 2 and 10 and about nine adults -- the event took on the appearance of a church potluck supper. We introduced ourselves and then suddenly found ourselves playing children's games and dancing to music. In one game people in the middle of the circle would try to bump people on the outside of the circle with their hips. Here we were in our coats and ties playing "rock, paper, scissors" to a type of folk music sung in English.

One thing Denny and I noticed right away was that the behavior of the young children was **not** being restrained or corrected in any way by parents. Consequently, children were hitting and pushing each other down -- even adults were being belted! When one feisty little boy came at me with a stick, I took it out of his hand and hid it in a nearby closet when no one was looking.

The contrast in behavior between these children at the party and older students seen in school earlier was amazing. Parental attitudes about nurturing seem to swing from outright permissiveness at the younger ages to strictly enforced obedience once the children get through the elementary grades. Could it be that the Japanese wished to allow toddlers the freedom to develop interests and social characteristics without being molded by their parents?

I sang the "Johnny Appleseed" blessing (in keeping with all American folk music we had heard), and then we all helped ourselves to a buffet of Chinese and Japanese fried foods and desserts. While we ate I asked some of the parents about this language club. Apparently, it was formed to help whole families learn English. The aim is to present a foreign language to the adults in the same fashion that children learn it. That explained all the songs, games and dancing.

After the party Mrs. Miyata took me with her daughter and her son to the basement of the department store in downtown Okayama to shop for groceries. No large paved lots exist around stores or malls in Japan. Instead, one might see a rice patty next to an office building or store. We parked in a garage that resembled a ferris wheel for cars. Mrs. Miyata drove onto a platform and got out. Then an operator moved the car into some kind of storage hidden overhead.

After buying some bread and fruit we went to pick up Kikuko's husband, Yoshiaki-san. He is an assistant professor of food chemistry and nutrition at the sister school to Notre Dame University in Okayama. He is conducting research on the impact of nutrition on children's teeth in Japan. A lot of the children are getting cavities. I asked him if fluoride was added to the Okayama water supply. He said that it was not.

The Miyata children range in age from 21 to 9. Shohei, the son, is much smaller than my own son who is the same age. I thought he was only about 5 years old when I first met him. Some Japanese children seemed less mature physically for their age as seen through my western eyes. Shohei remains the baby in the family in many ways. My presence obviously had little impact on his behavior which became progressively more selfish during the evening. Correction finally came from Yoshiaki-san who shoved Shohei away when he tried to grab a photo out of his father's hand.

As a parent myself I was fascinated with the way Japanese family members related to one another. It was surprising how many similarities there were with American families. Kikuko is Catholic, but her husband Yoshiaki is "not religious" as she put it. Neither Mrs. Miyata or Mrs. Inada in my other homestay worked outside the home. Both of the Miyada parents are immensely proud of their 21-year-old daughter who recently passed her exams and is studying at college. Haruko, their 16-year-old daughter, was very sweet and well behaved. She spoke a little English, and displayed what I thought was a typical teenage reaction upon receiving a gift t-shirt from a foreign visitor.

I kept thinking how this family acted like a Japanese version of "Leave It to Beaver." Haruko and her mother performed all of the household chores while I was there -- neither her brother or father helped out in the kitchen. On Sunday Haruko had to go to a special cram class for exams she was to take soon. First, however, we all piled into their little Toyota and drove to look at a Buddhist temple before I had to return to my group and Haruko had to study.

The Miyata family appeared to be a typical middle class family in an Okayama suburb. They had a dog. Their kitchen was complete with every modern appliance imaginable. In the living room with the shrine and doll collection were the traditional paper windows backed by storm windows. The evening meal was plentiful but not exotic. We had jello and ice cream for dessert.

As the guest I was offered the traditional bath first, which in Japan is really a hot soak after lathering up and showering separately. The toilets all had a little fountain over the tank that would run fresh water whenever the toilet was flushed. I assumed that one could wash hands or take a quick drink from it. The living room with its tatami mat became my bedroom once the futon (fluffy sleeping bag) was pulled out from a closet. The entire house could not have had more than 1000 square feet of space.

7/4/90 Independence Day at Kasei Gakuen Buddhist School

Students are to live "brightly," "honestly" and "friendly" every day at this 85-year-old private Buddhist girls school in Kyoto, Japan. It costs about $3000 a year to come to this school which is lavishly furnished in equipment and facilities. There is a strong emphasis in science, social studies, math, literature and English

language study. There is also time spent taking home economics as well as religion classes.

A televised language program "vivid English" is broadcast every day during lunch, and the school has its own broadcast studio and swimming pool. We visited an English language class and sang "hokey-pokey" with ninth grade girls. Classes are conducted much like their American counterparts, although even American private schools probably do not deal with students who look and act so much alike. Between classes the girls would mob us in the halls seeking autographs in English. There was a lot of excitement, and for the first time I saw that teachers had their hands full keeping things in order. It was a relief to find a little chaos in this highly structured society.

My observations of three different schools in Japan left me with the impression that in comparison American schools are not doing so bad after all. It was observed that there were often between 35 and 50 Japanese students per classroom, and even the Japanese themselves admitted the need to introduce more creativity and critical thinking into subject areas. Some students complained that classes were boring -- most teachers were lecturing when we visited. Social studies educators at a separate meeting complained that the national government interferes too much with teachers' freedoms. While we were there, a scathing editorial appeared in a Tokyo newspaper criticizing the national government for its rigid censorship of textbooks.

Another important difference between our two school systems is that American schools seem to be dealing with more of a diverse student population in terms of language and culture. Social ills of broken homes, drug abuse and ethnic prejudice seem to have had a greater impact on U.S. school programs and curricula than on their counterparts in Japan.

In contrast, Japanese students all seem to want to do well at school to fulfill a strong sense of community purpose and family responsibility. There appears to be almost a direct link in Japan between scholastic achievement and career choice based on intensive exams taken at age 15 and beyond. Those students who score high enough may enter universities and will then have better career opportunities. This also puts a lot of pressure on teenagers, however.

One of the biggest contrasts between the two educational systems has to do with the standardization and amount of support provided by the national governments. In Japan there are very high standards in achievement enforced throughout the country. Forty-seven percent of the national revenue has also been shifted to education. Half of a teacher's salary is paid by the national government. In the U.S. only 7% of national revenue is directed toward education, and there is a wide variety of programs and curricula based on individual state standards and funding. Unlike Japanese public schools, however, there are a lot more support staff in American schools (e.g., media and content specialists, special education teachers).

7/8/90 HOMESTAY WITH THE INADA FAMILY IN TOKYO

Mr. Inada picked me up at the Palace Hotel, and we rode the subway and train out to a suburb of Tokyo. We walked through a shopping district and stopped at a coffee shop to talk. He told me that he worked for IBM Japan and had a wife and two sons (age 13 and 15). We then walked another 15 minutes to his house

which was sandwiched in with others on the street. Their house was larger than that of the Miyada family but not very big by U.S. standards.

Mrs. Inada gives lessons on her own Yamaha piano at home. She also does all the cooking and housework. When Mr. Inada asked if I cooked, I said that I usually clean up and wash the dishes. He whispered for me not to tell his wife. We spent the evening looking at each other's photo albums and watching Wimbleton tennis on television. The older son was cramming for exams but kept coming down to check on the tennis match. The younger son, Jun-san, was very affectionate, and though we could not speak each other's language, we soon were getting into tickling fights.

I took a shower -- they do not use the bath in the summer -- and was careful to switch from my house slippers to the "water closet" slippers in the bathroom to show proper manners in a Japanese home. My regular shoes of course were left just inside the front door. I was glad that I had brought only my overnight bag because there was no closet space.

Later that night we ate supper with Mrs. Kondo (Mrs. Inada's sister) as a guest. The food was well prepared and consisted of rice, vegetables and a Mexican-like meat dish we decided to call "Kondo surprise." For dessert Mrs. Inada brought out "natto" which consisted of fermented soy beans poured over rice. It looked like uncooked beans in syrup. The two boys would take their chop sticks and pull this gooey mixture up into their mouths with loud slurping noises. That was considered polite. I declined my serving by saying that I preferred to watch others eat it.

I asked both Mr. Inada and the ladies how they spent their Sundays. Mr. Inada said that he sleeps late, then after breakfast reads the paper. In the afternoon he jogs in the park, then returns home to take a bath and watch T.V. or drink beer or saki. Mrs. Inada and her sister shop for groceries and cook. They also seemed more involved with taking care of children and keeping up with their education.

Many upper middle class Japanese families like the Inadas spend their summers traveling all over the world. The Inadas have been all over Europe. He told me that he is dying to come to the Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia. Although an avid golf fan, Inada-san probably has never played on a golf course in Japan. Land is too scarce. The mountains, where one would expect to find second homes and cabins, are reserved for parks and shrines.

Although the Inada home was small it had all the modern conveniences and appliances. The electronic stereo and VCR were state of the art. While I slept Inada-san videotaped the World Cup soccer final which we watched while eating breakfast the next morning. Then, their 13-year-old son Jun put on his backpack over his Snoopy t-shirt and walked off to school. Lines of boys and girls led by older students like Jun could be seen each morning walking through neighborhoods on their way to school.

Inada-san and I took some last minute pictures in the short driveway next to their 5 x 10 foot garden. Most Japanese make up for the lack of front yards by packing every conceivable bush, tree and ground cover into their gardens. This was no exception. I marveled how meticulous everyone was with the space around their homes. Mr. Inada and I then walked off to catch the subway into downtown Tokyo.

Riding the subway at this time of day was a real "trip." At the station when a train pulled up people would rush into each car and then more people on the platform would keep pushing and cramming themselves into the car until we were all packed like sardines inside. The doors would slowly close as the conductors would cram a few more bodies past the threshold. I hoped I did not accidentally poke someone or drop anything. One thing was certain. You did not have to worry about being mugged. Nobody could move a limb in any direction once the doors were closed.

July 9, Closing Banquet

The Japanese are keen on giving gifts. They must be wrapped too. I hate wrapping gifts, but fortunately the hotel cloak room attendants would do it for me at no charge. I gave out t-shirts to many of the helpers who accompanied us around Japan. Some of us KKC fellows also composed songs like "I wish they all could be Okayama Girls" and "Help me, Honda" sung to Beachboy tunes. Our hosts seemed generally amazed and delighted at how joyful and energetic many of us were throughout the trip. By the end of our stay some of the young Japanese guides and assistants had "loosened up" quite a bit and were acting as silly as we were.

There must be 600 employees in the Palace Hotel that might have a staff of 250 in the U.S.-- a labor intensive operation. The American embassy official had told us that Japanese work longer hours but not necessarily more efficiently than Americans. There was certainly attention to details on this trip. Our luggage was always in the rooms when we arrived at our destination, and we never worried about getting lost (at least for very long). I think there is still a lot that we can learn about each other's culture, but most importantly I know that the Japanese desire to remain our friends.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain how the lack of space affects life in Japan.
2. How are women treated differently in Japan as compared with women in the U.S.?
3. How is Japanese home life both the same and different from home life in the U.S.?
4. Give examples of how the Japanese pull together or assimilate ideas from other cultures.
5. List and describe two examples of what might be labeled as "traditional" Japanese values still present in their society today. Are there any values that seem to have changed in Japanese society?
6. Compared with childrearing practices in the U.S., what is unusual about the way Japanese parents seem to treat young children?
7. What attitudes do the Japanese have toward Americans? Give supporting examples from the journal or other sources.
8. Explain how Japanese schools are both the same as and different from American schools.
9. How do upper middle class Japanese families spend their summer vacations?
10. What examples of Japanese culture do you think Americans should strive to copy or adapt? Which values in our own society differ from those of the Japanese but should be maintained?

PHOTOS ACCOMPANYING THE JOURNAL ENTRIES OF THE COMPACT SOCIETY

Page 1: (a) The author in the home of the Inada family with Mrs. Inada and Jun at the piano. (b) Sudo-san (KKC assistant) standing next to one of the bullet trains.
Page 2: (a) A graveyard in Kyoto, (b) skyline of Kyoto.
Page 3: (a) Buddhist temple in Okayama, (b) two young ladies posing next to graffiti wall at Yoyogi Park, Tokyo.
Page 4: (a) Opening ceremony of Tenmaya Department Store clerks, (b) Tokyo fish market employee pulling a wagon of tuna.
Page 5: (a) Buddhist girls school classroom in Kyoto, (b) two high school students demonstrating Kendo sword fighting, a club activity at Komaba Senior High School in Tokyo.
Page 6: (a) A horticulture club activity at Komaba Senior High, (b) unicycle racing in a P.E. class at Kasei Gakuen School.
Page 7: (a) a girl's volleyball squad at Komaba Senior High, (b) an astronomy class at Kasei Gakuen School, Kyoto.

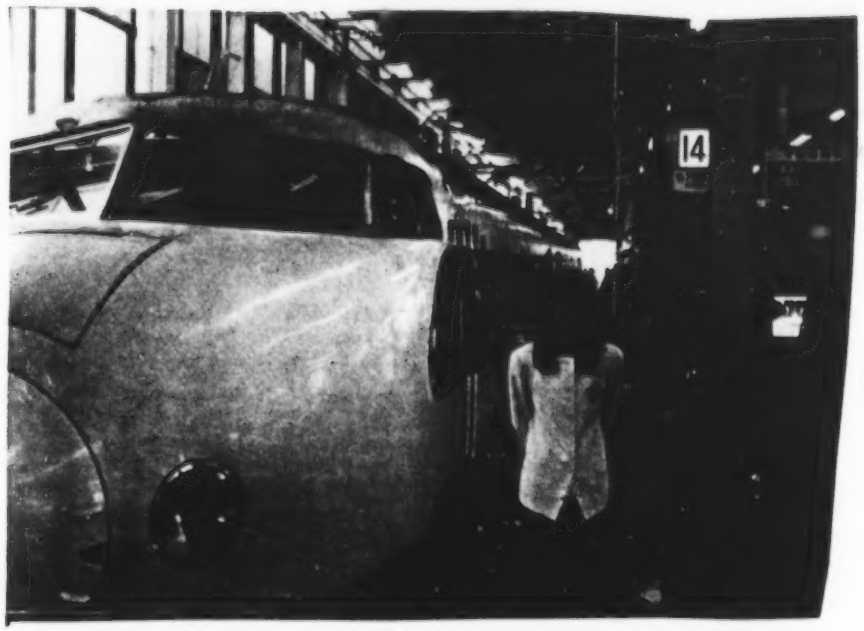
ACTIVITY (Target group: 7-12th grade)

Objective: Students will be able to analyze primary source photos and compose a generalization about modern Japanese society.

Put students in groups of three and assign one page of pictures per group. Ask each group to discuss what they see in the pictures and to compose one generalization about Japanese society from their analysis. Make sure that each group reaches a consensus about the generalization, and that students know that any of them may be called on to explain their answer.

You may want to use the cooperative learning technique of assigning the roles of "recorder," "drill sergeant," and "summarizer/encourager." The recorder is responsible for writing down the ideas of the group. The drill sergeant must keep the group on task and make sure they finish in the time limit. The summarizer/encourager checks to see if everyone understands what has been said by paraphrasing group ideas and encouraging a quiet group member to participate.

The teacher may also want to demonstrate the task by defining a generalization and providing the class an example from the pictures on page 1. An example might be: "The Japanese enjoy a high standard of living in a high technology society." Discuss each group's generalization or have them critique each other's in a nonthreatening way. Then, ask for similarities and differences between American and Japanese cultures based on the pictures.



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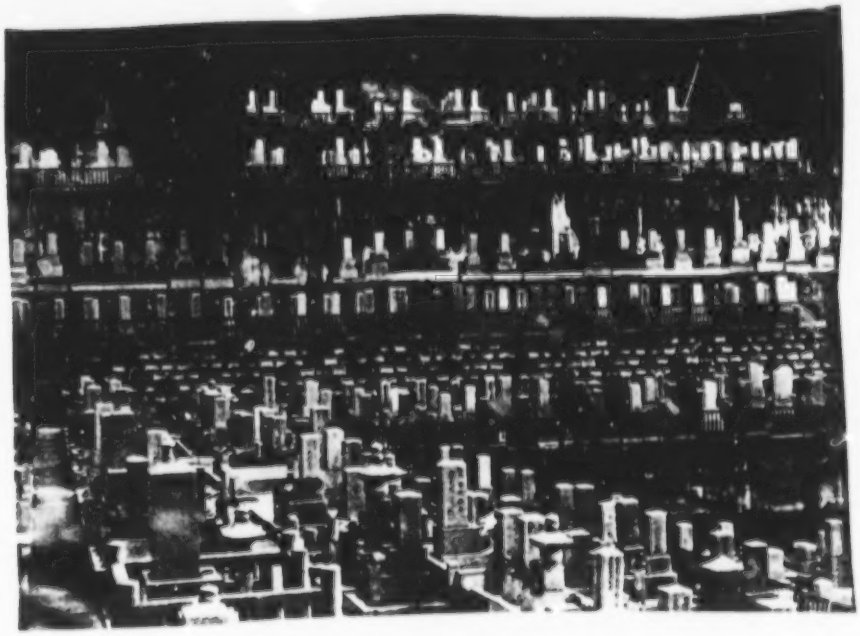

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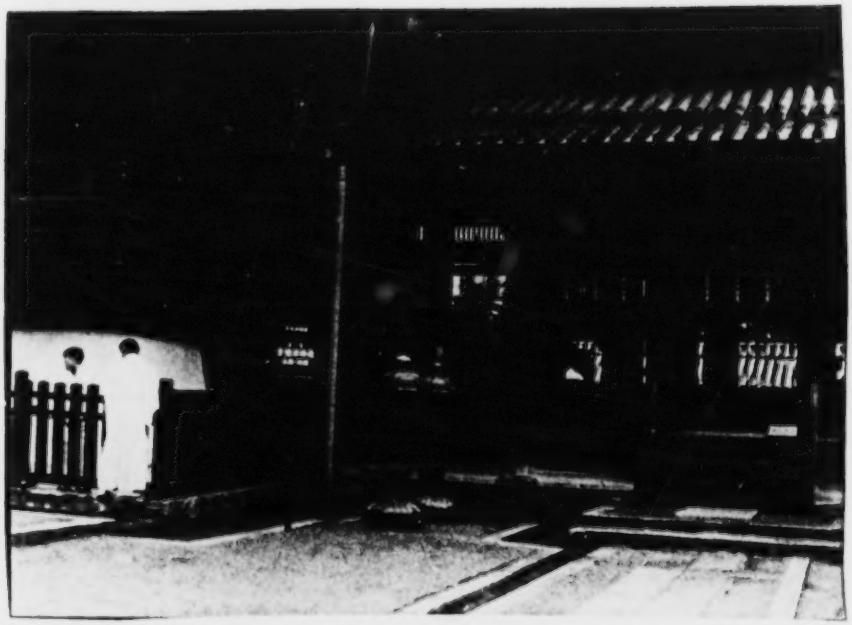

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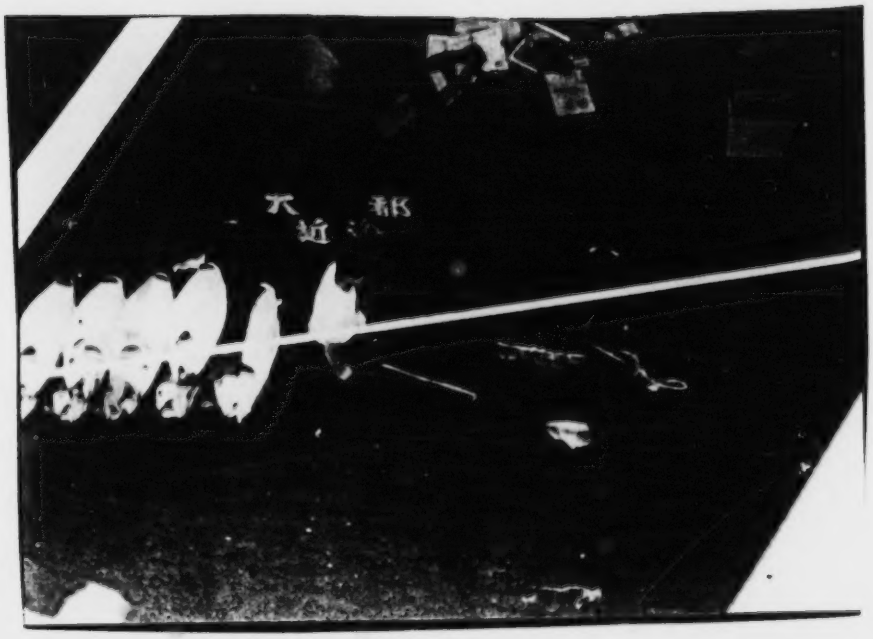

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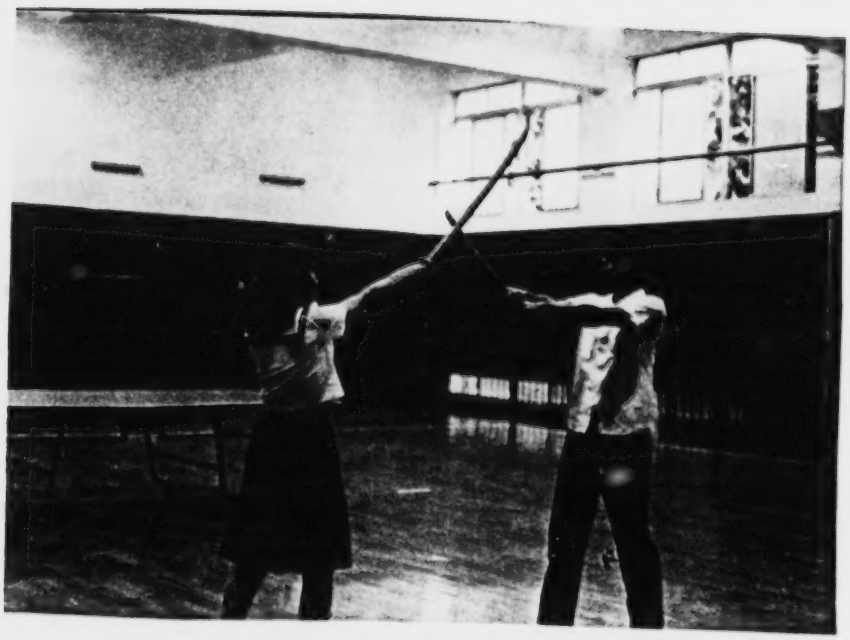

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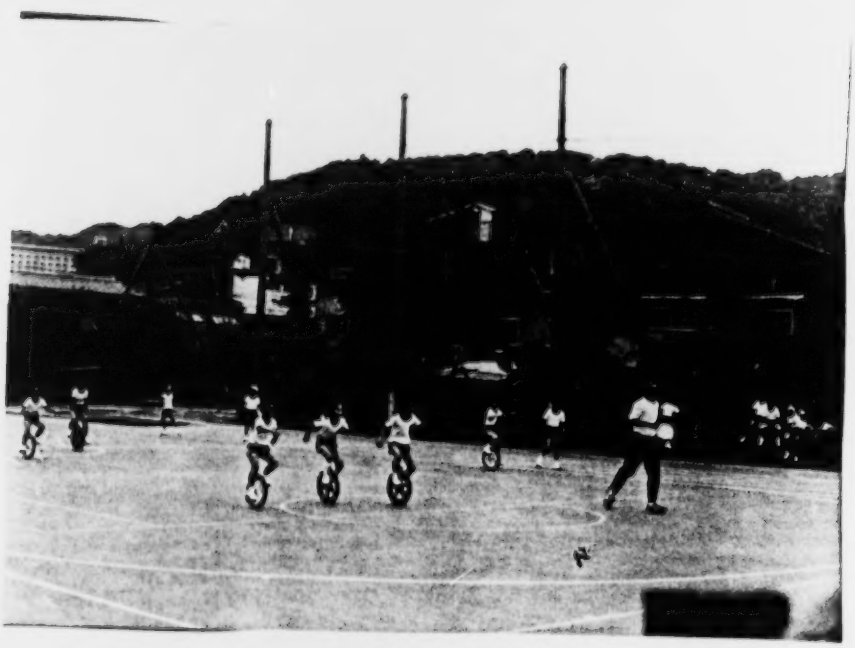

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